

This incident occurred in Mexico City under the administration of President Carlos Salinas, who served from 1988 to 1994. The exact day, the 16th of September, or Diez Y Seis de Septiembre, comes back better than the year as the wide avenues in the Capital were lined by all the military forces of the whole Republic. The exact location was slightly north of the President's Palace.

Snappy presidential honor guards presented arms; soft-whiskered cadets stood at rigid attention. A bearer holding the red, green and white flag of the republic on a slanted staff never wavered as President Salinas rode by, waving from a convertible. The Indian women surrounding my vantagepoint stared unmoved by the passing of a chief executive, as impassive as the stone images on the palace scrolls.

Congestion from bad planning jammed the young president's motorcade right in the forefront. The *Indios'* attention, however, focused on an organ grinder so big the owner had to have a helper to move his instrument, not to mention helping yank his monkey out of the reach of kids. He kept playing "Rancho Grande" over and over as if the old song was significant to the act. (The last time I told this story, he was playing the waltz "Cielito Linda," but "Rancho Grande" is a better polka for a monkey's dance.) The parade lasted longer than I did.

On this Sunday, the 2nd of July, Mexico elected a new president, defeating a party that has been in power for 71 years. Part of the initial shock from this side of the border is the large numbers of Mexican citizens who went back to vote. Mexico has no absentee voting. Booths were set up in the border towns and cities. Newspapers said a whopping 100,000 Mexicans were going home to vote from Los Angeles.

Projections of such huge numbers make the old-time drawing power of the South Texas machine to bring Mexicans to this side of the Big River to vote seem like piddling small-time politics. Once, a border patrolman told us at the bunkhouse one night over supper that his first lesson in border democracy was catching a trio of wets above Brownsville carrying poll tax receipts in their packs. (In the 1950s, the \$2.50 we paid to vote in Texas was called a "poll tax." In 1964, the 24th amendment to the Constitution made it illegal to charge to vote in federal elections.)

"The closer it came to Election Day, the more wets we disfranchised," he said. "A few carried sample ballots marked for a prominent county official."

As soon as the shock subsides from the new president, we are going to need to go back to business in the shortgrass country to estimate how long a cowboy or shearer is going to need off to go vote in Acuna or Piedras Negras. Cinco de Mayo and the 16th of September require about five weeks off the ranch with another week thrown in upon return

to stabilize the celebrant. The "Cinco" and the "Diez y Seis" were already practically overlapping. July 2nd National Election Day might have to be shifted to fit in between "The Day of the Dead" and the traditional Mexican Christmas, the sixth of January.

Way back before working illegal aliens became against the law, quite a number of hands voluntarily deported themselves in August, especially if livestock were doing good enough to allow time to build fence. Deflecting flint rock with a crowbar tends to cause deep homesickness in the 100 degree August sun. Took me about 20 summers before I learned to shift the job chart to fit the economic needs of the cowboys.

President Fox says he favors a legal program to send workers to the U.S. We need his support. And it may be possible, as he owns a ranch and wears boots to work. Critics claim he doesn't have an economic plan. They probably don't realize how many notes he has written down in his tally book or scratched on the saddle house wall in marking chalk. Like the rest of us, he'll have to book his winter feed in the fall, be sure he has enough bulls to breed his cows, and then he'll be able to set about writing a budget before the December inauguration. (County agents were the first offices to advise ranchers over here to keep written records. Maybe we could do a lend lease deal on county agents until Mr. Fox learned to stop writing down counts on his gloves or his chap pocket.)

In time, we'll know how long voting takes in July compared to, say, seeing about sick grandmothers and sick sisters. I've been out of contact so long I may need a refresher. But I would suppose if you knew the price of "three X beer" extrapolated by the number of dollars per month salary, you'd find the amount of days needed to cast a ballot in Acuna, Coahuilla.